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ABSTRACT

Past research has suggested that gender and race may be important factors in the development of students' political attitudes, that males express more positive political attitudes than do females, and that white students express more positive political attitudes than do black students. A 31-item Political Attitudes Inventory was administered to 327 high school students to examine their political attitudes with respect to gender and race. Previous factor analyses yielded factor structures which established the construct validity for the concepts of Social Trust, Social Integration, Political Interest, and Political Confidence. The study used a 2x2 (gender x race) factorial design. The interaction effect between the two independent variables (race, sex) was found to be nonsignificant for each of the four dependent variables (Social Trust, Social Integration, Political Interest, Political Confidence). Further analyses indicated that race was a significant source of variance for Social Trust, Social Integration, and Political Confidence; in all cases blacks expressed more negative attitudes than did whites. Gender differences were significant in only one area: females demonstrated a lower sense of Political Confidence than did males. No differences in Political Interest among the groups were demonstrated. These findings suggest than both female students and black students sense a lesser degree of personal influence on political activities. (NRB)

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Students' Political Attitudes:

Are Gender and Race Important Variables?

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Abstract

The major research questions addressed in this study were: (1) Is there an interaction between the effects of sex and race on students' political attitudes? (2) Is there a relationship between gender and students' political attitudes? (3) Is there a relationship between race and students' political attitudes?

The sample consisted of 327 secondary students in a southeastern metropolitan school system. A 31-item Political Attitudes Inventory was administered to the students in March, 1984. Previous factor analyses yielded factor structures which established the construct validity for the concepts of Social Trust, Social Integration, Political Interest, and Political Confidence.

The interaction effect between the two independent variables was nonsignificant for each of the four dependent variables. However, the results of the study suggested significant differences between black and white students in terms of Social Trust, Social Integration, and Political Confidence; in all cases blacks expressed more negative attitudes than did whites. Gender differences in political attitudes were apparent in only one area, Political Confidence. Females demonstrated a lower sense of Political Confidence than did males. Apparently, both female and black students sense a lesser degree of personal influence on political activities. No differences in Political Interest among the groups were demonstrated.

One of the primary interests and objectives of social studies educators is the development of positive political attitudes. Research in political socialization suggests that gender and race may be important factors in the development of students' political attitudes. The purpose of this study was to examine the political attitudes of a sample of high school students with respect to two variables, gender and race.

Review of Related Literature and Research

Gender and Political Attitudes

Past research suggests that males express more positive political attitudes than females. Greenstein's study (1965) of elementary school children's political attitudes indicated that females showed less political interest and awareness than males in the early elementary years. Hess and Torney's national survey (1967) noted small but consistent attitudinal differences between females and males across grade levels. Males expressed more interest in politics and reported more political activity than females.

Research by Herskanen (1971) found that Finnish female students were also less likely to report participation in political discussions than were males. Similar to the findings of the American studies, the Finnish research found male students to be more politically aware than female students. It was noted, however, that social class differences were greater than gender differences; male secondary students were more knowledgeable than female secondary students, but secondary students demonstrated greater political knowledge than did vocational students, regardless of gender.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 1970 surveyed young persons at four age levels, 9, 13, 17 and adults between the ages of 26 and 37. They found that females expressed more positive political attitudes during the school years, but fell behind the men at the adult level (Education Commission, 1971, 1973, 1974).

With regard to the citizenship goals, the NAEP study suggested that females were slightly more willing to associate with persons of different races: males were both more knowledgeable about and supportive of human rights; males knew more facts about government and law; males showed a greater understanding of international problems; and females were more involved as good citizens within their families. At school ages, males and females responded similarly to participation in effective civic action. As adults, however, men were more likely to take action as individuals, and women were more likely to take action through organizations. Seventeen-year-old and adult males knew more ways to influence government decisions than did

females; they also felt more capable of exerting their influence on the decision-making processes (Education Commission, 1971).

Vaillencourt's (1972) panel survey of 1,000 California students, ages 9-15, found that males tended to have a higher sense of political efficacy than did females. Race and class differences were also noted; whites and students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tended to express a stronger sense of political efficacy than did blacks and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

In the mid-1970s, two studies suggested that the gender differences in political attitudes were no longer significant. In the spring of 1974, during the Watergate investigations, Segall (1975) studied the political attitudes of 1,361 high school students in metropolitan Cleveland. Unlike earlier political socialization investigations, no difference was found in the political attitudes, orientations, or socializing influences of males and females. Similarly, in their survey of 2,365 Illinois students in grades four through 12, Orum, Cohen, Grasmuck, & Orum (1974) found no gender differences with regard to partisanship, actual political participation, or amount of political discussion.

During the same time period, Iglitzin (1974) investigated a slightly different but related matter, students' attitudes toward political issues. She found that young females were more likely to say they would vote for candidates who were peace-oriented, honest, and sincere; males preferred candidates whose ideas would contribute to the country's economic wealth.

Given the time period in which the data for the preceding studies were collected, the applicability of the findings for today's students is questionable. Two studies in the 1980s, one conducted in the United States and the other in England, suggested that females may express more positive political attitudes than do males. A recent study by Hepburn and Napier (1982-83) examined students' political attitudes by gender. The researchers surveyed 3rd, 8th, and 12th grade students in a southeastern metropolitan school system. Males and females expressed progressively more positive political attitudes; while the differences by gender were not statistically significant at the 3rd and 12th grades, females in the 8th grade exhibited more positive political attitudes than did males. In the 12th grade, an observed differences in the same direction was noted.

Wormald's (1983) interviews with 15-year-old students in English comprehensive schools found only slight gender differences with regard to political knowledge and political interest; in contrast to most previous studies,

however, the direction of the differences favored the females. Consistent with the earlier research by Iglitzin (1974), Wormald also found gender differences in attitudes toward particular issues. When students were asked to list the main problems affecting Britain, boys mentioned inflation and unemployment, while girls were more likely to cite homelessness as the primary problem. When asked about major problems facing the world, the majority of males mentioned war and most females cited poverty and hunger.

Other studies have examined gender differences in adult political attitudes. Both Bertelson (1974) and Welsh (1977) examined national data obtained from the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center. Bertelson found that in 1968 males were more likely than females to say they devoted "much attention" to international affairs. Males were also more likely than females to report that they had attempted to influence another's political choice. With respect to students' sense of political efficacy, only one of five items measuring the construct yielded gender differences.

In examining the election survey data for the years 1952, 1964, and 1972, Welsh (1977) controlled for the structural factors of age, region, education and income. The resulting analysis found no significant gender differences in political participation, which included such activities as voting, writing public officials, joining a political club and working within a political party. Both male and female participation rates were affected negatively by situational factors such as marriage and children. A third situational factor, employment, had a significant positive effect on females' political participation, which it had no effect on males' participation.

Although the primary focus of the present study is political attitudes, it should be noted that research has consistently suggested that males are more knowledgeable about political affairs than are females (Education Commission, 1971, 1973, 1974; Herskanen, 1971; Iglitzin, 1974; Orum et al., 1974). Of the studies surveyed, only one indicated that females were slightly more politicallly aware than were males (Wormald, 1983). At this point, the relationship between political knowledge and attitudes is unclear. While previous studies have indicated that males demonstrate greater political knowledge and express more positive political attitudes than do females, males have traditionally played a larger role in the political arena than have females. For males, learning more about the political world may be a positive experience; such may not be the case for females.

The early studies regarding gender differences in political attitudes concluded that males tend to have a higher sense of political efficacy, a stronger interest in political matters, and a higher level of participation in

political discussions. In addition, males tended to demonstrate a higher degree of political awareness than females. Recent research suggests that those gender differences may be disappearing.

Race and Political Attitudes

Studies have generally suggested that black children exhibit more negative political attitudes than white children. The Langton and Jennings study (1968) indicated that black high school seniors expressed significantly lower feelings of political efficacy than their white counterparts. No differences were noted, however, in terms of political interest. Vaillancourt's panel survey (1972) of 1,000 adolescents also suggested a lower sense of political efficacy among black students as compared to white students.

In 1969, Liebshultz and Niemi (1974) surveyed inner-city black children, using a questionnaire similar to the one devised by Hess and Torney for comparison purposes. They found that blacks expressed more negative political attitudes than the whites in the Hess and Torney (1967) study; the differences were statistically significant as early as the third grade.

The recent study by Hepburn and Napier (1982-83) generally supported previous research; blacks demonstrated relatively less enthusiasm for public political participation than did whites in grades 3 and 12. Long's research (1983) suggested that the differences in political attitudes between black and white students may be attributed to a higher sense of political reality among blacks.

The increasing participation of females and blacks in the national political arena and the subsequent media attention devoted to them suggests the need for further study of students' political attitudes by gender and race.

Research Questions

The major research questions addressed in this study were: (1) Is there an interaction between the effects of sex and race on students' political attitudes? (2) Is there a relationship between gender and students' political attitudes? (3) Is there a relationship between race and students' political attitudes?

Definitions

Political Attitudes supportive of democratic citizenship are those described by Ehman in his 1977 study. Trust refers to the belief that human behavior is consistent and governed by positive motivations. Cynicism is the opposite of trust. Integration refers to the belief that

one is connected to one's social environment. Social alienation is the reverse of social integration. Confidence is defined as the belief that one's actions can have an effect on political activities. It is similar to, but more general than the widely used concept political efficacy. Interest refers to beliefs that predispose one to respond positively toward political situations. In this study, as in Ehman's, the attitudes of trust, integration, confidence, and interest are operationally defined by scores on the four scales of the Political Attitudes Inventory (Ehman, 1977).

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 327 secondary students in a southeastern metropolitan school system. A description of the students by gender and race is presented in Table 1. Teachers of the students volunteered their classes to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

The Political Attitudes Inventory was administered to the students in March, 1984. The Inventory consists of 31 items; the instrument resulted from two field tests. Previous factor analyses yielded factor structures which established the construct validity for the concepts of Social Trust, Social Integration, Political Interest, and Political Confidence. Factor analyses for this study generally supported the original factor structures specified by Ehman and Gillespie. (1). Ehman and Gillespie (1975) reported reliability coefficients for the factors ranging from .70 to .83.

Results

The study used a two x two (gender x race) factorial design. A separate analysis of variance was conducted on each of the four dependent variables: Social Trust, Social Integration, Political Interest, and Political Confidence. The tests for homogeneity of variance between groups were nonsignificant, $p > .05$. Means and standard deviations of the four dependent variables for the two values of each factor are presented in Table 2.

The interaction effect between the two independent variables was nonsignificant for each of the four dependent variables, $p > .05$. Following are the ANOVA results on each of the independent variables.

Social Trust

The analysis of variance indicated that race was a significant source of variance, $F(1, 323) = 31.060$, $p < .001$;

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white students demonstrated a higher level of social trust (M = 13.82) than did black students (M = 11.72). The main effect for gender was nonsignificant, $F(1, 323) = .622$, $p > .05$.

Social Integration

The F-test on Social Integration showed a statistically significant difference between white and black students, $F(1, 323) = 5.164$, $p < .02$. White students exhibited a higher sense of social integration (M = 20.78) than did black students (M = 19.97). The gender main effect was nonsignificant, $F(1, 323)$, $p > .05$.

Political Confidence

The analysis of Political Confidence indicated that race was a significant source of variance, $F(1, 323) = 9.900$, $p < .002$. Black students demonstrated a significantly lower sense of political confidence (X = 20.39) than did white students (M = 21.96). The results also indicated a significant main effect for gender, $F(1, 323) = 14.317$, $p < .000$. Females exhibited a significantly lower degree of political confidence (M = 20.58) than did males (M = 22.36). As previously noted, the interaction effect between the two independent variables was nonsignificant, $p > .05$.

Political Interest

The analysis of the Political Interest scores indicated that the two main effects were nonsignificant, $p > .05$. Neither race nor gender appeared to affect students' political interest.

Discussion

The results of the study suggest significant differences between black and white students in terms of Social Trust, Social Integration, and Political Confidence; in all cases blacks expressed more negative attitudes than did whites. Gender differences in political attitudes were apparent in only one area, Political Confidence. Females demonstrated a lower sense of Political Confidence than did males. Apparently, both female and black students sense a lesser degree of personal influence on political activities. No differences in Political Interest among the groups were demonstrated.

The more negative political attitudes expressed by black students is consistent with previous research. In attempting to understand the results, however, Long's (1983) suggestion may be instructive: black students may have a strong sense of political realism, which is then reflected in the lower levels of Social Trust and Social Integration.

The results with regard to Political Confidence are of perhaps greater concern: if a student feels that he or she has a lower level of influence on political decision-making processes than his or her peers, one may assume that the student will exhibit a low level of political participation. While the results of this study are not generalizable, social studies educators may want to be aware of the potentially lower feelings of Political Confidence among blacks and females.

The present study is limited in two respects which should be noted. First, random selection of the participants was not possible. Therefore, as previously noted, the results are applicable only to the sample. They are, however, useful in suggesting hypotheses for study of random samples of students.

Second, the study is descriptive in nature; it does not offer an explanation of the differences in political attitudes among groups. In view of the scarcity of current research in this area, it was felt that a descriptive study was warranted. However, future researchers should attempt to extend their investigations toward an understanding of the factors which may promote lower feelings of Social Trust and Social Integration among black students and a lower sense of Political Confidence among black and female students.

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Footnotes

[1]A full report of the factor loadings, the Cronbach coefficients for internal consistency, and the correlations between the factors are available from the authors.

Table 1

Number (and Percentage) of Students by Gender and Race

	Race		
Gender	Black	White	Total
Male	51 (16%)	105 (32%)	156 (48%)
Female	60 (18%)	111 (34%)	171 (52%)
Total	111 (34%)	216 (66%)	327 (100%)

Table 2

Mean Scores (and Standard Deviations) for Political Attitudes by Gender and Race

Political Attitude	Gender	Race: Black	Race: White	Race: Combined
Social Trust	Males	12.18 (2.99)	13.53 (3.32)	13.09 (3.25)
	Females	11.33 (3.34)	14.10 (3.20)	13.13 (3.52)
	Combined	11.72 (3.19)	13.82 (3.26)	13.11 (3.38)
Social Integration	Males	19.80 (3.07)	20.46 (3.20)	20.24 (3.19)
	Females	20.12 (3.68)	21.09 (2.66)	20.75 (3.09)
	Combined	19.97 (3.40)	20.46 (2.94)	20.51 (3.14)
Political Confidence	Males	21.31 (4.14)	22.87 (3.98)	22.36 (4.09)
	Females	19.60 (4.11)	21.11 (4.36)	20.58 (4.32)
	Combined	20.39 (4.19)	21.96 (4.25)	21.43 (4.29)
Political Interest	Males	24.94 (5.60)	25.24 (5.89)	25.14 (5.75)
	Females	25.17 (7.02)	24.54 (6.12)	24.76 (6.44)
	Combined	25.06 (6.38)	24.88 (5.99)	24.94 (6.11)

Note. The maximum potential scores for Social Trust, Social Integration, Political Confidence, and Political Interest were 25, 25, 35, and 40, respectively.